

ASSOCIATED PRESS
15 March 1986

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NICARAGUA-LOBBYING
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WASHINGTON

President Reagan's speech Sunday night in defense of his Nicaragua policy will cap perhaps the most intensive tug-of-war between hawks and doves on a foreign policy issue this city has seen since the Vietnam era.

Reagan has been relentless in his pursuit of congressional approval of \$100 million in aid, including \$70 million in military assistance, to the Nicaraguan resistance. Not a day has gone by for the past two weeks without a public statement by Reagan in defense of his proposal.

His critics have not been able to dominate the media the way Reagan has. But the president so far seems unable to translate his own high degree of personal popularity into broad-based congressional support for his policy.

Both sides in the debate are bringing heavy pressure on lawmakers. "I feel caught between the rhetorical cries on either extreme of the question," Rep. Paul Henry, R-Mich., said Thursday.

Following Reagan's nationally televised speech Sunday night, Sen. James Sasser of Tennessee will deliver the Democratic response. House and Senate votes are scheduled this week.

If the proposal is not approved, the administration says, the United States might be forced to introduce American troops to stop the "red tide" from spreading to the U.S. border.

But critics, led by House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, say the administration has it backward. Approval of the request will lead inexorably to a U.S. troop commitment, they maintain.

Passions have been running high, and some Democratic opponents have angrily accused administration officials of questioning their patriotism.

The administration has unleashed White House communications director Patrick Buchanan in the campaign. He wrote 10 days ago that the Democratic Party will have to decide whether it stands with Reagan on the issue or with Nicaraguan President "Daniel Ortega and the communists."

This prompted Rep. Mike Barnes, D-Md., to complain of "red-baiting tactics." Buchanan's thesis was too much even for some Republicans. Sen. Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas said it was absurd to assume that those opposed to Reagan "want to abandon San Diego to the communists."

The administration has been doing its best to win over the swing votes. Following complaints that the resistance forces were hopelessly divided, Secretary of State George P. Shultz summoned the leaders of two rival Contra factions to his office a week ago in a fence-mending effort.

In response to complaints that he was not doing enough to pursue a diplomatic solution in Central America, Reagan dispatched Ambassador Philip Habib to the region to examine the prospects for a negotiated settlement. Habib returned Friday.

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Reagan discussed the trip Saturday in a 10-minute telephone conversation with Habib from Camp David, after the president devoted his weekly radio address to another appeal for aid to the Contras. "Mr. Habib indicated his trip would be extremely helpful as we move forward with our Central American policy," said Denny Brisley, assistant White House press secretary.

Since the start of the month, Contra leaders have been waging a high-visibility campaign on behalf of the request. Over the past week, the State Department has been releasing anti-Sandinista documents almost daily. A new document, titled "Revolution To Repression," is scheduled for release Monday.

On Wednesday, a classified CIA report on prison expansion under the Sandinistas was leaked to a reporter. The following day, an extensive report on the same subject was made public by Wesley Smith, a conservative activist who returned recently from Nicaragua.

For the past few days, Reagan himself has held a series of one-on-one "jawboning" meetings with skeptical members of Congress. On Thursday, he inaugurated an exhibit featuring weapons and other equipment allegedly sent by Nicaragua to leftist rebels in El Salvador. On Friday, Reagan said he was "a Contra, too."

Reagan made another pitch in his weekly radio address Saturday, charging that agents of Nicaragua's government dress in Contra uniforms and then "murder and mutilate ordinary Nicaraguans." He called it "a brutal campaign to bring the freedom fighters into discredit."

Critics have countered with equal fervor. Americas Watch, a human rights group, released a report 10 days ago saying most of the atrocities in Nicaragua have been committed by the Contras. It accused the administration of trying to explain away the abuses.

The same day, nearly 200 religious leaders formed a human cross on the steps of the Capitol and said the administration prefers "terrorism to the pursuit of peace."

In what the State Department said was a move inspired by Contra opponents, the General Accounting Office, the congressional watchdog agency, released a report saying the administration cannot account for the supplies it has sent to the insurgents.

For television audiences, a liberal group has produced a half-hour anti-Contra documentary entitled "Faces of War," slated for viewing in 14 states. Earlier, the National Endowment for the Preservation of Liberty, a conservative group, launched a \$1.8 million advertising campaign in support of the Contras. It is being shown in the nation's capital and throughout the South.

Both sides agree the stakes are high.

But by government standards, the sum of money is minuscule: the \$100 million being sought by Reagan is only 3 percent of what the United States was spending on the Vietnam war at its height.